**Chinese Civil War of 1945–1949**

Although the Chinese Nationalist and Communist movements had pledged to unite against Japanese aggression in 1936, conflict between them actually grew during the war against Japan (1937–1945), setting the stage for a civil war. The approaches the Chinese Nationalists and Communists employed during the war against Japan basically determined the outcome of the civil war. From 1941 through 1945 the Nationalist government held back from major offenses against the Japanese while it grew in international stature and acquired a powerful and generous ally in the United States. Nevertheless, the Nationalists suffered from a variety of internal weaknesses, including loss of its economically advanced territories to Japan, serious inflation, and deteriorating popular support. For their part, the Chinese Communists made simple living and self-reliance into a patriotic virtue while winning widespread admiration for their aggressive anti-Japanese nationalism. Most important, they increased their territorial control across North China, where Communist military units, supported by local militias, knitted together popularly based regional governments behind Japanese lines. Operating largely without outside support, the Communists forces grew tremendously and developed a bold confidence in their newfound abilities.

**Full Civil War**

As Japan's collapse loomed in early August 1945, both the Communists and the Nationalists set in motion hastily made plans to expand their territorial control. The Nationalists held Sichuan and the southwest as well as some parts of central China, but they needed to reestablish their pre-1937 control over East and South China, especially the rich and fertile coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong. Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), the leader of the Nationalists, also intended to gain control of huge areas of China where his Nationalist government had never governed before 1937, including North China, Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, the northwest, and the huge but sparsely populated Xinjiang. Yet only two regions, North China under Communist control and Manchuria occupied by the Soviet Union, became the civil war's major battlegrounds.

Chiang rushed his forces to principal cities all around China, typically using U.S. air and naval units to transport his armies while demanding that defeated Japanese units hand over control only to his forces. Consequently, the Nationalists wound up with their armies in important cities throughout China, but their military and political strength was often thinly spread.

Communist strategy called for building on their present strength by surrounding and taking over the cities of North China. In a bold and ultimately decisive move, Communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976) dispatched General Lin Biao (1908–1971) with a large army to Manchuria, where he hoped the occupying Soviet forces might aid their fellow Communists.

Lin Biao's forces entering Manchuria received some assistance from the Soviet armies, but primarily in the form of letting Japanese arms fall into their hands. The Soviet Union still recognized Chiang's Nationalist government and so acceded to Nationalist occupation of the region's cities, ports, and railways. Before withdrawing in May 1946, the Soviets concentrated on looting Japanese factory equipment to rebuild their own war-ravaged economy.

On the U.S. side, doubts increased about the long-term prospects of its ally, the Chinese Nationalists. Chiang's problems were compounded in late 1945 as inflation continued, public confidence in the Nationalists did not revive, and relations between Chiang's armies and the recently liberated Chinese in the large coastal cities were uneasy. The Nationalists hoped for massive U.S. intervention on their behalf, but in the United States the postwar atmosphere demanded a return to normalcy. President Truman and General Marshall concluded that the Congress and American people would not be willing to commit the amounts of money, material, and fighting men needed to ensure a Chinese Nationalist victory. Nevertheless, the United States continued to give extensive economic and military support to the Nationalists.

American efforts in 1945 and 1946 to forge a compromise between the Nationalists and the Communists were unsuccessful because Chiang would not enter a coalition with the Communists, while the Communists insisted on maintaining independent control of the territory they administered. As Marshall prepared to return to Washington in mid-1946, he arranged the appointment of an American missionary educator, John Leighton Stuart, as the new U.S. ambassador. Although Stuart knew both the Nationalist and Communist leaderships in China, he was new to diplomacy and lacked Marshall's close connections in Washington, so his appointment indicated the shifting of U.S. attention away from China. After his return from China in January 1947, Marshall became U.S. secretary of state and gave his name to a plan to revive the European economy, signaling that again Europe would be foremost in U.S. foreign policy concerns.

Even during Marshall's mission, Nationalist-Communist armed conflict increased. Overall, Nationalist armies fared well in these battles, and by late 1946 Chiang, certain of victory, reorganized his government with a new constitution followed by national elections. Taking Yan'an, the Communists' wartime capital, in March 1947, buoyed the Chinese Nationalist's military fortunes.

**Turning of the Tide Against the Nationalists**

After July 1947 the Nationalist cause began to sputter. Reconciliation with Chinese who had been under Japanese occupation often proved difficult. The serious wartime inflation deepened, making it difficult to restart the modern sector of the Chinese economy. Fear of Communist influence led the Nationalists into general suppression of freedom of expression.

In the summer and fall of 1947, Communist armies began to win victories in North China. Then from December 1947 to March 1948, Lin Biao's armies won a series of major battles in Manchuria. By early November 1948, Lin had destroyed some of the Nationalist's best armies and taken over Manchuria. In these engagements, the Communist military adopted a new pattern that departed from its preference for guerrilla warfare by moving to regular battlefield formations composed of large infantry armies supported by some tanks, artillery, and aircraft. Nationalist divisions began to surrender to the Communists and then to reappear on the Communist side under new leadership with their modern American equipment.

In North China, Communist commanders used similar tactics with great success. As Manchuria slipped from the Nationalists' grasp, the Communists in October 1948 opened a general offensive in southern Shandong known as the Huaihai campaign. Chiang threw his best remaining divisions into the fray only to lose them by January 1949. As the full enormity of the Nationalist defeat emerged, the Nationalist general in command of the Beijing-Tianjin region surrendered with 200,000 soldiers.

Economic collapse compounded these battlefield disasters. Runaway inflation tore through the Nationalist economy like a great typhoon, leaving ruin every-where in its wake. Opposition elements within the Nationalist Party forced Chiang to resign in January 1949, and General Li Zongren (1890–1969) became acting president. In April 1949, Communist armies crossed the Chang (Yangtze) River and began the task of mopping up resistance in the huge areas under real or nominal Nationalist control. Chiang directed evacuation of the loyal remnants of his civil and military machines to Taiwan.

**Stalemate**

In the summer of 1950, with the outbreak of the Korean War, the struggle between the Communists and Nationalists became folded into the Cold War. Small-scale military incidents continued for several years, and then both sides entered a stalemate. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, even though the economies of the People's Republic of China (main-land China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan) have become closely interwoven, the Chinese civil war never has been formally ended.